

# MODERNISM AND EUGENICS

*Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the  
Culture of Degeneration*

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## CHAPTER I

### *Virginia Woolf's hereditary taint*

Virginia Woolf's eugenical self has gone largely unremarked – perhaps not surprisingly. On the one hand, as Woolf's latest biographer Lee observes: "Virginia Woolf doesn't have a life, she has lives."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, as Woolf herself notes of Orlando, "she had a great variety of selves to call upon, far more than we have been able to find room for, since a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may have as many thousand."<sup>2</sup> So the fact that one of Woolf's selves has gone unheard and one of her lives untold is not surprising in itself. On the other hand, this silence may be a function of the fact that such a self and such a life do not accord with today's received myths. As Lee notes, "from the 1960s onwards, rival myths took shape out of the libertarian, radical and feminist movements of the time, constructing Virginia Woolf as a bold, revolutionary pioneer, a Marxist and lesbian heroine, a subversive cultural analyst and a historian of women's hidden lives."<sup>3</sup> Some of those who subscribe to such myths may regard the thesis that Woolf was a eugenicist as an attack upon her, and since, as Eliot observes, "[t]here is a large class of persons, including some who appear in print as critics, who regard any censure upon a 'great' [writer] as a breach of the peace, as an act of wanton iconoclasm, or even hoodlumism," I must hasten to add that this essay is not part of what Lee calls the "hostile Leavisite attack on Woolf . . . as a pernicious and typical representative of Bloomsbury elitism, prejudice and complacency."<sup>4</sup> I simply agree with Lee: "all the information and all the interpretations should be written, or re-written, as accurately as possible."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the eugenical self needs a voice; the eugenical life, a telling.

As we know, eugenics comes in two forms – negative and positive – and Woolf supported both. Her negative eugenics appears in a 1915 diary entry, where she records her thoughts about a group of people

she encountered on a walk – people apparently institutionalized on account of defective mental development:

we met & had to pass a long line of imbeciles. The first was a very tall young man, just queer enough to look at twice, but no more; the second shuffled, & looked aside; and then one realised that every one in that long line was a miserable ineffective shuffling idiotic creature, with no forehead, or no chin, & an imbecile grin, or a wild suspicious stare. It was perfectly horrible.

Her conclusion – “They should certainly be killed” – represents a most negative eugenics.<sup>6</sup> Years later in *Three Guineas* (1938), Woolf's eugenics is more positive. Surveying the many “duties . . . which are specially appropriate to the daughters of educated men,” Woolf contemplates the role of such daughters become “the mothers of educated men” and urges that “a wage . . . be paid by the State to those whose profession is marriage and motherhood.” Her justification of such a policy is positively eugenic:

Consider . . . what effect this would have upon the birth-rate, in the very class where births are desirable – the educated class. Just as the increase in the pay of soldiers has resulted . . . in additional recruits to the force of arm-bearers, so the same inducement would serve to recruit the child-bearing force, which we can hardly deny to be as necessary and as honorable . . .

In her otherwise anti-war tract, Woolf recruits soldiers for the biological war that must be won by positive eugenics if England is to produce the “desirable” kind of future citizen who will help to create “peace and freedom for the whole world.”<sup>7</sup>

Woolf's eugenics has not gone completely unremarked. Apologizing for Yeats's well-known enthusiasm for eugenics, Cullingford quotes this passage from *Three Guineas* as part of her argument that “[t]he decline in the European birthrate between 1880 and the Second World War caused observers of all shades of the political spectrum to embrace eugenic ideals.”<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Rose apologizes for Edwardian enthusiasm for eugenics by means of a similar gesture towards Woolf: “Very few eugenicists openly advocated the extermination of the subnormal, but the suggestion was sometimes made in private, even by Virginia Woolf.”<sup>9</sup> So high today is the estimation of Woolf's politics, and so low the estimation of the politics of Yeats and modernism generally, that the ignominy of one's eugenics is apparently mitigated by Woolf's having kept company with the same ideas.

Woolf scholars themselves, however, have been less inclined to allow that she could even have entertained eugenical ideas. Stephen

Trombley reveals that many of Woolf's doctors were thoroughgoing eugenists, but he hastens to assure us that so far as eugenics is concerned, "[w]e can be certain that doctor and patient were hopelessly at odds."<sup>10</sup> Roger Poole singles out Dr. T. B. Hyslop for contempt, speculating that his paralyzing neurosis in old age was "[a] curious latter-day revenge taken by the spirit" for his eugenical beliefs. He mocks Hyslop for his "naive, almost crazy theory, that the vital energies of the Empire were being sapped, and that strong measures were to be taken against further decline." Unaware of how typical and how widespread Hyslop's eugenical beliefs were, and apparently unaware of Woolf's very similar eugenical ideas in *Three Guineas*, he concludes that "Hyslop's eugenics, mixed with his concern for the Empire and a kind of Gilbert and Sullivan grasp of Darwinism, is beyond serious comment."<sup>11</sup>

Woolf herself clearly disagrees about what deserves serious comment. Her diary and *Three Guineas* constitute serious enough comment about just this sort of eugenics. And of course Foucault disagrees: the discourse of "bio-power," by which the state assumes the right to eliminate "biological danger to others," certainly receives serious comment from him. Our contempt today for early twentieth-century eugenics must not blind us to the quite different attitudes of quite different people in quite different times.

In the following chapters, I outline briefly the nature of the eugenics that Woolf knew, the social and political context in which she encountered it, and the ways that eugenical ideas impinged upon her sex-life and marriage. I argue that the issues raised by eugenics were so important to Woolf as to force their way not just into her diary and *Three Guineas*, but also into one of her most important novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and one of her most important essays, *A Room of One's Own* (1928). In the course of this argument, I focus upon many other texts – other essays, other novels, diaries, letters, and so on – yet my purpose is not to provide a comprehensive account of the influence of eugenics upon everything that Woolf wrote, but rather to detail two examples of the kind of readings of her work enabled by awareness of the eugenical discourse that surrounded her and at times took voice through her.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the problems raised by eugenists are contemplated both by a wide variety of characters and by the third-person narrator – a narrator whose attitudes often reflect those of the author herself. Close attention to the role of eugenics in *Mrs. Dalloway*

reveals the extent to which Woolf accepted eugenics, regarding it as a literally unremarkable response to certain problems in the modern world. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf's conception of a woman's literary tradition as a pattern of influence grounded in the enabling priority of women precursors is itself facilitated by eugenical thinking – a thinking that extends “bio-power” into the realm of woman's imagination.

Woolf was introduced to the science and the ideology of the eugenics movement in a variety of ways. Eugenics was the focus of published controversy, for instance, in three main areas: where its claims impinged upon the domain of other sciences, where its claims to provide the remedy of social ills contradicted the beliefs of social reformers, and where its claims implied consequences for everyday life.<sup>12</sup> Woolf need not have read the specialized scientific journals to have learned of eugenics at this time. From 1900 to the First World War, there were many articles on eugenics in newspapers, magazines, and popular journals such as *The Times*, *The Nineteenth Century*, *The Monthly Review*, *The Westminster Review*, *The Hibbert Journal*, and so on.<sup>13</sup> In 1910, for instance, an editorial in *The Times* sparked controversy by celebrating the research at the Galton Eugenics Laboratory by which Elderton concluded that the children of alcoholic parents did not inherit their parents' defects. Temperance supporters like Alfred Marshall and believers in the inheritance of acquired characteristics like John Maynard Keynes publicly attacked this conclusion during a letter-to-the-editor controversy that lasted two years.<sup>14</sup>

So ubiquitous was eugenics, in fact, that Woolf found one of her early book reviews in *The Cornhill Magazine* published alongside an essay clearly reflecting eugenical thinking: Henrietta Barnett's “Some Principles of the Poor Law” (1908). Contemplating revisions in the administration of the Poor Law, and noting both the increasing numbers of the poor in Britain and the inconsistent regional policies in the implementation of the Poor Law, Barnett urged that the poor everywhere be treated with a view to their “restoration to Industrial Efficiency”:

first . . . the nation must be willing to believe in the possibility of such men's restoration; secondly, to pay for it; and thirdly (and this is the most alien to the present lawless attitude of public thought), to agree that he should be controlled while he is being restored to industrial efficiency, or permanently

detained if he fails to attain to a standard by which he can support himself or is fit to call others into existence.

Prostitutes should also be detained until restored to industrial efficiency: "How many girls have I seen go out of the lock wards when they 'felt better' to spread sin and suffering, when powers of detention would have kept them long enough to have broken their lawless connections and discipline taught them self-control."<sup>15</sup> One notices the general eugenical concern about the unrestricted ability of the unfit to propagate, and the apparently neo-Lamarckian proposal to allow propagation only by those who have acquired and therefore can pass on good character.

Did Woolf read Barnett's essay? As part of Beatrice Webb's circle, Barnett was known to Woolf, and so Woolf may have read the essay of someone she was likely to meet socially. And of course authors often note the work appearing alongside their own in magazines and journals. Moreover, Woolf was alert to the sorts of problems raised by Barnett. In her own essay, she criticizes Lady Dorothy Nevill as naive because of her nostalgia for the elegantly witty society of her youth: "life is not merely a matter of dinner parties; there are the 'lower classes,' country houses, politics and arts. In order that you may have a society such as she laments, all these surroundings must be properly arranged in due relation to it."<sup>16</sup> Barnett's essay offers advice about precisely such arrangements. Furthermore, Woolf implies familiarity with "the principle of . . . Industrial Efficiency" promoted by social hygienists like Barnett, for her later diary entry criticizing imbeciles as "ineffective" suggests neither the language of medicine nor the language of common prejudice, but rather the very language of Industrial Efficiency. So whether or not Woolf read this particular essay by Barnett, she was certainly familiar with the text that the Barnetts of the turn of the century were circulating – what Foucault calls the eugenical discourse of the body, a scientific discourse designed "to transform the sexual conduct of couples into a concerted economic and political behavior."

It is also clear from the diary entry cited above that Woolf was familiar with an even more negative eugenics. W. Duncan McKim, for instance, proposed that

[t]he surest, the simplest, the kindest, and most humane means for preventing reproduction among those whom we deem unworthy of this high privilege, is a gentle, painless death; and this should be administered not as a punishment, but as an expression of enlightened pity for the victims

– too defective by nature to find true happiness in life – and as a duty toward the community and toward our own offspring.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, the emphatic word “certainly” in Woolf’s assertion about imbeciles – “They should certainly be killed” – can be read as an indication that Woolf is here confirming either a conclusion that she knows others have reached or a conclusion that she herself had reached even before this experience. That is, she seems to understand her particular observations to corroborate a general eugenical argument (like that of McKim, Shaw, Wells, and Lawrence) – an argument so familiar to her that her train of thought seems to run, “Yes, the eugenical conclusion is right: imbeciles should be killed.”

Another way that the eugenics in the air reached Woolf was by means of friends and acquaintances like the Webbs who were active in the eugenics debate. Even more intimate friends with whom she socialized more regularly – Goldsworthy (“Goldie”) Lowes Dickinson, John Maynard Keynes, and Ottoline Morrell – were members of the Eugenics Education Society itself.<sup>18</sup> Charles Darwin’s son Leonard, whom Woolf knew as the “widower of 50” who married her childhood friend “dear old Mildred Massingberd,” became the very visible, long-serving president of the Eugenics Education Society in 1911. Dear old Mildred herself served on the Reception Committee of the First International Eugenics Congress in 1912.<sup>19</sup> Josiah Wedgwood, another of Woolf’s acquaintances, was the Liberal MP who led the spirited and widely reported opposition to the Mental Deficiency Bill in 1913.<sup>20</sup> He protested that “[t]he only interest of Hon. Members who support this Bill is the production of wealth by the community”; as Jones notes, he believed that the Bill “exemplified the attitude of mind which saw the working class solely in the light of their economic efficiency or inefficiency.”<sup>21</sup> Woolf – condemning imbeciles as “ineffective” – would have recognized that Wedgwood’s campaign against views like Barnett’s also implied criticism of views like those she expressed in her diary. Another way of reading her conclusion that “ineffective” imbeciles should “certainly be killed,” therefore, is as an emphatic rejection of the criticism of her own views that she perceived in Wedgwood’s arguments: “I am right, and Wedgwood is wrong: they should certainly be killed.”

Shaw also played a noteworthy role in introducing Woolf to eugenics – particularly Lamarckian eugenics. In 1916, Woolf attended Shaw’s lecture “Religion” – the last in the Fabian lecture series “The World in Chains,” which was chaired by the “widely

known eugenicist" C. W. Saleeby.<sup>22</sup> "Religion" was never published, but it is clear that Shaw lectured on his philosophy of the Life Force, described in the Introduction above (p. 7) in the quotation from his contemporaneous essay "The Religion of the Future." Shaw's thesis – that "there never will be a God unless we make one" and "that we are the instruments through which that ideal is trying to make itself reality" – echoes years later in Woolf's own "philosophy" about the elision of God and humanity: "the whole world is a work of art . . . But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself."<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Shaw advocated a Lamarckian version of eugenics: "My biology is all right: I explained it before the amazed Saleeby at my first lecture. You will find it all in the third act of *Man and Superman*, in . . . the passage from my essay on Darwin in which I sweep away the silly controversy about the inheritance of acquired habits – as if, Good God! there were any habits but acquired habits to an evolutionist . . ." Shaw's defense of Lamarckian eugenics was particularly vigorous because of the presence of Saleeby, who seems to have represented for Shaw the turn-of-the-century "Neo-Darwinian lunacy, when it was scientific to think of Darwin as a giant and of Butler as a nobody."<sup>24</sup> Inspired by Samuel Butler's defense of the inheritance of acquired characteristics in *Luck, or Cunning?*, Shaw depicted a future to be realized, in part, through a cunning eugenics.

Woolf's doctors were another likely source of her knowledge of eugenics. Poole describes Hyslop as a "guardian of the purity of the blood of the race."<sup>25</sup> Hyslop felt compelled to comment upon the Mental Deficiency Bill in the *Journal of Mental Science*: "One point for our consideration is whether this matter of preventing procreation by the mentally defective is of equal urgency to the other matters referred to in the Bill. I, for my part, believe that it is one of the most important and farthest reaching of the benefits proposed." He anticipated opposition to such a prophylactic eugenics – "in spite of the overwhelming evidence of much evil inheritance that tends to destroy the vital energies of the nation, there are many who will raise their voices in indignant protestation" – but dismissed it as "owing to fetish worship of the liberty of the subject."<sup>26</sup> In *Roger Fry* (1940), Woolf recalled that Hyslop not only opposed the modernism represented by Roger Fry's Post-Impressionist exhibition "Manet and the Post-Impressionists" (London, November 1910 to January 1911), but

did so by associating the art with degeneration – giving “his opinion before an audience of artists and craftsmen that the paintings were the work of madmen.”<sup>27</sup>

Another of Woolf's doctors, Maurice Craig, held similar views. In his popular medical textbook of 1905 he drew attention to the dangers of race suicide: “alcohol is the curse of the British race, and is slowly but surely undermining the moral energy of the nation. . . [It] deranges the nervous system and leads to early decay of the intellectual faculties of the individual, it produces degeneracy in the offspring, and finally extinction of the race.”<sup>28</sup> In a later essay (1922), he argues that “[t]he country is learning that the greatest asset to a nation is good health and that a small number of A1 men count for infinitely more than a crowd of the C3 class.”<sup>29</sup>

Although Trombley is wrong to suggest that “Craig's attitude is in fundamental opposition to that of Virginia Woolf,” it is unlikely that Woolf directly gathered her knowledge of eugenics from either Craig or Hyslop.<sup>30</sup> Certainly she consulted Craig regularly after 1912, and her husband Leonard consulted Hyslop about her health in the same year, but Woolf did not consult Hyslop herself and she did not socialize with either of these doctors. It is quite likely, however, that Leonard himself represented their eugenical views to Woolf as part of his argument that the couple should not have children.

Peter Alexander points out that despite Virginia Woolf's love of children and despite her gloom at the prospect of childlessness, Leonard became determined that they should not have children and so was disconcerted when

Sir George Savage . . . said that he considered children were exactly what Virginia needed . . . This was not what Leonard wanted to hear, as he showed by seeking, not just a second, but a third, fourth and fifth opinion. He took the advice of Jean Thomas, the woman who ran the Twickenham asylum in which Virginia had several times been treated, and his diary records that he also took the advice of three doctors, Maurice Craig, Maurice Wright and T. B. Hyslop . . . Of these doctors, only Craig considered that having children might be too risky for Virginia . . .<sup>31</sup>

Leonard himself did not like children. Moreover, he was genuinely concerned that having children would risk his wife's fragile mental health. Yet he may also have been influenced by eugenical concerns about passing on Virginia's supposedly tainted blood.<sup>32</sup> He was himself conscious of questions about purity of blood and about the relative value of races: he experienced anti-Semitism (including his

wife's); his family was against mixed marriages (his grandfather disinherited children who married outside the faith); he believed his race superior to others ("You may say what you like, but the Semitic is worth . . . 30 Aryans").<sup>33</sup>

In fact, if we read the views attributed to the psychologist Sir William Bradshaw in *Mrs. Dalloway* as representing Virginia's understanding of her own doctors' views (as these views were represented to her by Leonard), then the novel implies that when Leonard (mis)represented to Virginia her doctors' advice that she should have no children, he explained such advice as having been based at least in part upon eugenical considerations: "Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalized despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion."<sup>34</sup> Woolf's narrator imputes to Bradshaw eugenical interests in industrial efficiency, segregation of the feeble-minded, and laws against the propagation of illness and acquired bad character. Bradshaw's eugenics can thus be read as a figure for the eugenical advice borne to Woolf by Leonard – advice that was an amalgam of the eugenics of Hyslop, Craig, and perhaps Leonard himself.<sup>35</sup>

Although Sir George Savage has long been recognized as another of the models for certain aspects of Bradshaw, no one has suspected that he was a major source of Woolf's information about eugenics – perhaps because his eugenical beliefs are masked by his apparently anti-eugenical advice that children were just what Woolf needed (advice offered in full awareness as family doctor of the Stephens' apparently inherited predisposition to mental illness). Certainly Trombley notes that Savage was a eugenicist, but he notes only that so far as Woolf was concerned Savage did not practice what he preached. He draws attention to the latter's 1911 essay in which Savage identifies mental illnesses that doctors should treat as a basis for forbidding marriage: "In no case should it be allowed where there is a history of periodic recurrences, and it is certain that there is a very grave risk in those cases of adolescents who at puberty and with adolescence have periods of depression and buoyancy. I have seen a good many such cases in which there has been marriage in haste with a leisure of repentance." Furthermore, "[m]arriage should never be recommended as a means of cure."<sup>36</sup> Having in 1910 advised Virginia Woolf to get married – knowing that she had had recurring periods of depression and buoyancy since adolescence –

Savage seems to contradict himself.<sup>37</sup> Yet in a speech as the Royal Society of Medicine delegate to the First International Eugenics Congress – a speech not reviewed by Trombley in his otherwise comprehensive survey of Savage's attitudes – Savage qualifies his advice that mental illness is a basis for forbidding marriage. On the one hand, “[i]nsanity in many cases had to be looked upon as very much like genius; but genius never bred true, and scarcely ever produced a genius in the second generation. It was comforting to know that many cases of so-called sporadic insanity were like genius and did not propagate.” On the other hand,

[h]e recalled a number of families that seemed almost saturated with insanity. In one, three or four members had given evidence of mental disorder. The offspring of one of these . . . married into wholly unrelated families, with the result that they had perfectly healthy children. There was a natural tendency to breed out, as well as a terrible responsibility for breeding in. One could not exclude all neurosis, by marriage, by eugenics, or anything else. If one could, it would reduce the world to such a dead level of respectability that it would be hardly worth living in.<sup>38</sup>

This is neither the advice nor the voice of Sir William Bradshaw, prophet of the goddesses Proportion and Conversion. Savage seems to have regarded Woolf's mental illness as an instance of sporadic insanity, perhaps a byproduct of genius itself. His advice that she marry and have children suggests that he agreed with F. W. Mott (to whose paper his speech at the Eugenics Congress was a response) that marriage and childbirth were to be recommended in the case of certain women liable to insanity: “an important and perhaps the only cause [of insanity] in many instances [is] the enforced suppression by modern social conditions of the reproductive functions and the maternal instincts in women of an emotional temperament and mental instability.”<sup>39</sup> Savage may have regarded Woolf as a woman of this type and the Stephen family more generally as a type of the family that can breed out hereditary mental illness.

Refusing to support Leonard's opinion that Woolf be advised not to have children – whether on the basis of her fragile health or on the basis of eugenical concerns – Savage is likely to have introduced Woolf to eugenics at the dinners to which he often invited her. He was the only one of her doctors with whom she socialized. Pronouncing her well after his first treatment of her, Savage invited her to dinner in February of 1905: “He asked me to go and dine with him!” She later remarked of the evening that it “was more heavy and

dreary than you can conceive.” Invited for dinner again in July, she teased her friend Violet Dickinson that she would ask Savage why her letters to Dickinson were at times so silly: “I think I shall ask him what bee gets into my bonnet when I write to you. Sympathetic insanity, I expect it is.”<sup>40</sup> Woolf’s joke acknowledges Savage’s reputation: in the language Mott used to describe him at the Eugenics Congress, Savage was the one “to whom they all looked up as the greatest living authority on insanity.”<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the joke shows that Woolf believes that she can depend on Dickinson’s knowing this reputation, too. There are hints here of a one-dimensional reputation and perhaps a one-dimensional dinner conversation: Savage is the expert on insanity and the conversation acknowledges this fact; it is all rather dreary.

However many more times she may have dined with him in the interval, Woolf next records dining with Savage in 1911. Savage was trying to put together a guest list that included Dr. Seymour Sharkey and Jean Thomas, the proprietor of the nursing home where Savage occasionally sent Woolf, so Woolf may even have found her own case the subject of conversation at such meals.<sup>42</sup> Her experience of dreariness and heaviness, on the one hand, and the likelihood of table talk about Savage’s professional opinions about insanity (a likelihood that Woolf’s letter to Dickinson acknowledges), on the other, suggest that Woolf recalls such dinners in *Mrs. Dalloway* when she describes the Bradshaws’ “large dinner-parties”: “without knowing precisely what made the evening disagreeable, and caused this pressure on the top of the head (which might well be imputed to the professional conversation . . .) disagreeable it was: so that guests, when the clock struck ten, breathed in the air of Harley Street even with rapture . . .” (pp. 143, 152–53). The contrast that Woolf draws between the Lady Bradshaw “feeding ten or fifteen guests of the professional classes” and the Lady Bradshaw who “[o]nce, long ago, . . . had caught salmon freely” presumably originates in table-talk about one of Savage’s favorite recreations: “fishing” (p. 152).<sup>43</sup> The description of Sir William Bradshaw as toiling “to raise funds, propagate reforms, initiate institutions!” (p. 152) may well derive from table talk about Savage’s work on behalf of the National Association for the Feeble-Minded. Savage gave the opening address to the Association’s annual meeting in 1909 (advising that “in view of the alarming increase of the feeble-minded class . . . the only remedy seemed to lie in measures for the early detection of the unfit and the

prevention of their propagation"). The Association's policy was to propagate reforms that would segregate the feeble-minded permanently in industrial colonies – a version of Lady Bruton's plan in *Mrs. Dalloway* to colonize Canada with Britain's orphans. Toward this end, the Association established "The Colony Fund," the 1909 meeting concluding with a report on the funds raised to date.<sup>44</sup> It is clear that the "professional conversation" at Savage's dinner table made a strong impression upon Woolf, and it is likely that explicitly or implicitly eugenics informed much of this conversation.

One can see the pervasiveness of eugenical discourse at dinner tables like Savage's in another fictional instance of such dinner table conversation in *To the Lighthouse*. During an argument about politics between Charles Tansley and William Bankes, Mrs. Ramsay suddenly reveals her enthusiasm about certain social and political problems by seizing on the slenderest of opportunities – Bankes's reference to bad English coffee – to turn the conversation to the subject of milk:

"Oh, coffee!" said Mrs. Ramsay. But it was much rather a question (she was thoroughly roused, Lily could see, and talked very emphatically) of real butter and clean milk. Speaking with warmth and eloquence, she described the iniquity of the English dairy system, and in what state milk was delivered at the door, and was about to prove her charges, for she had gone into the matter, when all around the table . . . she was laughed at . . .<sup>45</sup>

Her husband and children presumably laugh at the familiar signs of enthusiasm – an enthusiasm here producing something of a conversational *non sequitur* – and not at the equally familiar social conscience that she reveals. Mrs. Ramsay's zeal for social work is such that, although busy enough in London with her own acts of charity, she dreams that someday "she would cease to be a private woman whose charity was half a sop to her own indignation, half a relief to her own curiosity, and become what with her untrained mind she greatly admired, an investigator, elucidating the social problem" (p. 18).

Mrs. Ramsay has "gone into the matter" of milk production and delivery, and in doing so she has also entered the eugenics debate. As Megumi Kato points out:

In late Victorian Britain, the redistribution of the population to cities created a demand for milk far removed from its source. In the intervening period from farmers to consumers, milk was subjected to contamination and infection. Bacteriological findings in the 1880s that the milk supply was

a source of infectious diseases gave an impetus to much discussion that measures for the prevention of milk-borne diseases were needed.<sup>46</sup>

Self-styled advocate on behalf of London's poor, Mrs. Ramsay thinks, "[i]t was a disgrace. Milk delivered at your door in London positively brown with dirt. It should be made illegal" (*To the Lighthouse*, p. 89). Kato points out that by 1904, this issue had been appropriated by eugenicists: in his "Discussion of the Control of the Milk Supply," George Newman argues that "[t]he control of the milk supply is not only a concern of preventive medicine, but one of national importance."<sup>47</sup> An essay earlier the same year – "Milk and National Degeneration" – asserts that lack of milk is "an essential and primary cause of degeneration": "healthy babies are impossible without clean and wholesome cow's milk. . . . It is here that the question of physical deterioration of the nation comes in, for a few generations of weakly babies necessarily spell a nation with an undue proportion of defective citizens."<sup>48</sup> Uncertain whether Mrs. Ramsay "was aware of the political agenda of this discourse," Kato suggests that "contextualizing the milk problem reveals the racial character of this allusion" and allows us to see "how politicized her character actually is."<sup>49</sup>

The nature of Mrs. Ramsay's politicization in this matter is implied much earlier in the novel – and precisely in the context of questions of race, blood, and heredity. "Inventing differences," she thinks, is nonsense "when people, heaven knows, were different enough without that." The "real differences" that she has in mind are the differences between "rich and poor, high and low." According to Mrs. Ramsay, these are two distinct differences. The difference between rich and poor causes her to ruminate "more profoundly" than the other one, Woolf implies, because Mrs. Ramsay sees here the possibility of effective intervention on her part: she can take a "bag" of provisions to poor widows; she can record poor people's "wages and spending, employment and unemployment" in "a notebook." It is not clear to Mrs. Ramsay that the difference between "high and low" is a problem that deserves to be ruminated as profoundly as "the other problem" – "the great in birth receiving from her, some half grudgingly, half respect, for had she not in her veins the blood of that very noble . . . Italian house, whose daughters . . . [were] scattered about English drawing-rooms in the nineteenth century." The virtue of this blood, according to Mrs. Ramsay, is not only that it is noble, but also that it is Italian: "all her wit and her

bearing and her temper came from them, and not from the sluggish English, or the cold Scotch" (*To the Lighthouse*, pp. 17–18). If Mrs. Ramsay is something of a socialist, her socialism is of the Fabian sort that Shaw, Wells, and the Webbs demonstrate – at least so far as her attitudes toward race, blood, and heredity are concerned. That her armchair socialism eventuates in dinner-table eugenics is at first perhaps hard to see, but in the end quite easy to explain.

Supplementing Savage's presumed conversation about eugenics was Jean Thomas's. Savage's loyal supporter, she certainly was not reluctant to share with Woolf her opinions about what ailed her, and in doing so she made clear her eugenical assumptions. Woolf had "long conversations" with Thomas, which she characterized as potentially disagreeable: "What a mercy we cant [sic] have at each other! or we should quarrel till midnight, and Clarissas [sic] deformities [Woolf's sister Vanessa Bell was expecting a baby; Clarissa was a possible name for a girl], inherited from generations of hard drinking Bells, would be laid at my door."<sup>50</sup> Woolf alludes to the eugenical assumption that children inherit deformities from alcoholic parents. She presumes that either the assumption itself or her own eugenical views are so well-known to her sister that the latter will recognize her allusion. She suggests that Thomas has made a eugenical assertion to the effect that deformity in the Stephen family can be traced to the mental illness that Woolf herself has inherited. Eventually their conversations did indeed become quarrels – Thomas promoting Christianity as a cure for Woolf, Woolf maintaining her atheism: "What will be the end of Jean I cant think. . . Suppose this ends in Atheism, and she gives up lunatic keeping: well, her blood will be on my head." Not surprisingly, as Savage's representative in "lunatic keeping," Thomas is criticized in *Mrs. Dalloway* for the same failing that is associated with the Savage figure: Thomas's desire to convert Woolf to Christianity is figured in Doris Kilman, a character devoted, like Bradshaw, to the goddess Conversion.<sup>51</sup>

Whatever its sources – and there were certainly many – the eugenical opinion that surrounded Woolf seems to have converged in her own mind on the question of abortion. Troubled all her life by the childlessness that was her lot, Woolf returns via a canceled passage in *The Years* to the year 1910 and the question then of the role of eugenics in decision-making about whether or not one should have a child:

"Look at those wretched little children" said Rose, looking down into the street.

"Stop them, then" said Maggie. "Stop them having children."

"But you cant" said Rose.

"Oh nonsense, my dear Rose," said Elvira. "What you do is this: you ring a bell in Harley Street. Sir John at home? Step this way ma'am. Now Sir John, you say, casting your eyes this way & that way, the fact of the matter is, whereupon you blush. Most inadvisable, most inadvisable, he says, the welfare of the human race – sacrifice, private interests – six words on half a sheet of paper."<sup>52</sup>

The passage is perfectly ambiguous – and more. In the context of the concern by Rose, Maggie, and Elvira about "wretched little children" produced by the apparently reckless reproduction of the working class, Elvira's narrative can be understood as a description of a hypothetical encounter between Sir John and a working-class woman. Sir John's advice may be that her pregnancy is indeed "inadvisable," that another wretched little child does not promote "the welfare of the human race." Or if Sir John is worried about depopulation, his advice may be that abortion is inadvisable and against the interests of the human race. His argument may be that she must "sacrifice" her "private interests" for the public good. Yet Rose objects that Elvira's narrative is unrealistic so far as the working-class woman goes: "But how is that woman down there going to Harley Street? with three guineas?" (three guineas being the cost of the abortion). She implies that Elvira has actually described a conversation between Sir John and a middle-class woman. If so, Sir John's advice might be understood as a complaint that abortion by the middle-class woman is "inadvisable." His concern would still be about depopulation, but it would be the more class-based eugenical concern about the differential birthrate. The middle-class woman must sacrifice her private interests for the welfare of the human race. If so, Sir John's argument against abortion is similar to Woolf's argument against middle-class childlessness in the essay named for the price of an abortion: *Three Guineas*.

Yet there is also the biographical reading invited by Woolf's own experience of these matters. The middle-class woman visiting the Harley Street doctor can be read as a figure for Woolf herself, the doctor's advice being that for a woman such as Woolf – bearing a hereditary taint – to have a child is "inadvisable" (precisely the advice that Leonard seems to have conveyed to Virginia from her

doctors). To risk passing on polluted germ plasm is to neglect the welfare of the human race. Regardless of her personal desire for a child, she must make this sacrifice of her private interests. If the one most forcefully making this eugenical argument to Woolf during the early years of her marriage was in fact her husband Leonard, then a canceled phrase in the passage above lends further support to this biographical reading, for the woman first raises the subject of abortion by hinting that the idea is her husband's: "the fact of the matter is, my husband . . ."<sup>53</sup> Lee speculates that Woolf herself may actually have had an abortion in 1913.<sup>54</sup>

In each of these readings, Sir John's advice is eugenical: reproductive issues concern us all, for they bear on "the welfare of the human race." This canceled passage from *The Years* bitterly highlights the power of eugenics in 1910 – a power wielded here by doctors over patients, husbands over wives, middle-class women over working-class women. Contemplating the relation between domestic and public tyranny as much here as in *Three Guineas*, Woolf stands amazed before the "bio-power" that in 1910 coordinated money and words in an effort to preserve the national germ plasm: when Woolf got married, "Three guineas" and "six words on half a sheet of paper" – the six-word eugenical criterion "the welfare of the human race" – could determine whether or not one had a child.